

# Words from Patrick DeWitt's *The Sisters Brothers*

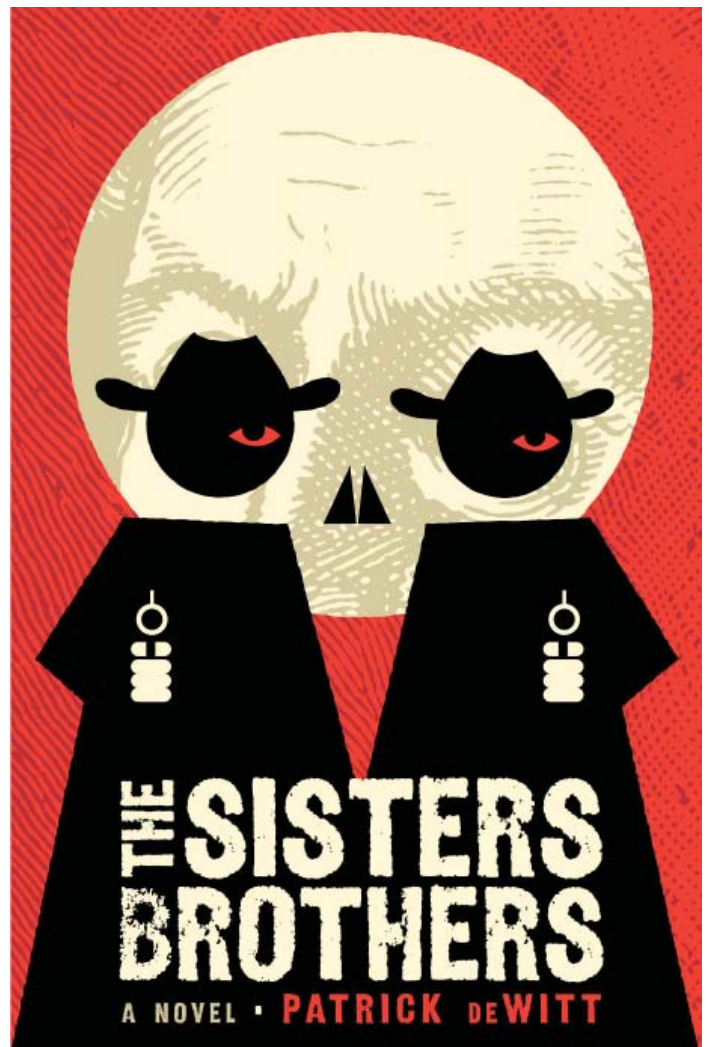
Avocabo Wordlist 80

ANNULAR, BERATE, BLATHER, BRAYING, BRUSQUE, COMMODORE, DOTING, ESCAPEDE, FRIVOLITY, GUILLESS, IMMOLATED, LAMENT, MAUDLIN, MAWKISH, OSTENSIBLY, PANG, PERILOUSLY, PETULANTLY, PLACID, PONTIFICATE, PROSPECT, SERIALIZED

**First Things First:** Enjoy the opening chapter of *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick DeWitt. Then go buy a copy!

*I was sitting outside the Commodore's mansion, waiting for my brother Charlie to come out with news of the job. It was threatening to snow and I was cold and for want of something to do I studied Charlie's new horse, Nimble. My new horse was called Tub. We did not believe in naming horses but they were given to us as a partial payment for the last job with the names intact, so that was that. Our unnamed previous horses had been immolated, so it was not as though we did not need these new ones but I felt we should have been given money to purchase horses of our own choosing, horses without histories and habits and names they expected to be addressed by. I was very fond of my previous horse and lately had been experiencing visions while I slept of his death, his kicking, burning legs, his hot popping eyeballs. He could cover sixty miles in a day like a gust of wind and I never laid a hand on him except to stroke him or clean him, and I tried not to think of him burning up in that barn but if the vision arrived uninvited how was I to guard against it? Tub was a healthy enough animal but would have been better suited to some other, less ambitious owner. He was portly and low-backed and could not travel more than fifty miles in a day. I was often forced to whip him, which some men do not mind doing and which in fact some enjoy doing, but which I did not like to do; and afterward he, Tub, believed me cruel and thought to himself, sad life, sad life.*

*I felt a weight of eyes on me and looked away from Nimble. Charlie was gazing down from the upper-story window, holding up five fingers. I did not respond and he distorted his face to make me smile; when I did not smile his expression fell slack and he moved backward, out of vies. He had seen me watching his horse, I knew. The morning before I had suggested we sell Tub and go halves on a new horse and he had*



*agreed this was fair but then later, over lunch, he said we should put it off until the new job was completed, which did not make sense because the problem with Tub was that he would impede the job, so would it not be best to replace him prior to? Charlie had a slick of food grease in his mustache and he said, 'After the job is best, Eli.' He had no complaints with Nimble, who was as good or better than his previous horse, unnamed, but then he had had first pick of the two while I lay in bed recovering from a leg wound received on the job. I did not like Tub but my brother was satisfied with Nimble. This was the trouble with the horses.*

A Quick Review of *The Sisters Brothers* by Adrian Hoard-Reddick, as published in *The Aquiline*.

*The Sisters Brothers* is the story of Eli and Charles Sisters, famous hired guns of an all-powerful Commodore, whose influence is felt from Oregon City, clear across the frontier to the gold rush-flushed state of California. *The Sisters Brothers* opens with a new job and new horses for the

brothers (their last horses were immolated in the previous job). The brothers are to travel to the west coast to kill a cheating varmint by the name of Hermann Kermit Warm, who has taken something from the Commodore.

The novel follows the Brothers through their cross-country adventures. Charles can't get through a town without giving himself an awful brandy hangover that delays the brothers' progress. Spiders, bears, bewitching women, beguiling crones and double crossing opportunists are but a few of the obstacles hiding in the bushes of this wonderful novel.

*The Sisters Brothers* is both violent and hilarious, often simultaneously! What makes the story so poignant is DeWitt's narrator, the younger and more portly Eli Sisters. Eli struggles with his violence and weight and the harsh treatment he receives from his often inebriated older brother, Charles. The novel is a picaresque, or rogue novel, in the tradition of novels such as John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, in which we follow the satirical adventures of low class rogues who live by their wits (and trigger fingers) in a corrupt society.

*The Sisters Brothers* is most deserving of its awards and kudos. It won this year's Governor General's Award for English Fiction and was shortlisted for the Mann Booker and Giller Prizes. *The Sisters Brothers* will keep you reading. It's a steady ride filled with adventure, comedy, not a few sudden deaths, mighty fine writing and some amazing chemistry.

**Exercise 80-1: Definitions** Fill in the blanks with the best word that matches each definition (22 Marks)

1. \_\_\_\_\_ *v. censure severely or angrily*
2. \_\_\_\_\_ *v. to destroy something or someone, usually using fire, as a sacrifice to a higher cause*
3. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. a person regarded as likely to succeed*
4. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. marked by rude or peremptory shortness*
5. \_\_\_\_\_ *v. work in an administrative capacity; supervise or be in charge of*
6. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. effusively or insincerely emotional*
7. \_\_\_\_\_ *adv. a manner in which one is easily irritated or annoyed*

8. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. put into a proper or systematic order*
9. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. a sudden sharp feeling*
10. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. the trait of being frivolous; not serious or sensible*
11. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. a wild and exciting undertaking (not necessarily lawful)*
12. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. free of deceit*
13. \_\_\_\_\_ *v. the cry of a donkey, laugh loudly and harshly*
14. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. a cry of sorrow and grief*
15. \_\_\_\_\_ *v. to talk foolishly*
16. \_\_\_\_\_ *adv. In a dangerous manner*
17. \_\_\_\_\_ *adv. from appearances alone*
18. \_\_\_\_\_ *n. a naval officer of high rank, in particular an officer in the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard ranking above captain and below rear admiral.*
19. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. extravagantly or foolishly loving and indulgent*
20. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. not easily irritated*
21. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. self-pityingly or tearfully sentimental, often through drunkenness*
22. \_\_\_\_\_ *adj. shaped like a ring*

**Exercise 80-2: Synonyms** For each word, provide a word with the same meaning (8 marks)

1. brusque \_\_\_\_\_
2. mawkish \_\_\_\_\_
3. guileless \_\_\_\_\_
4. lament \_\_\_\_\_
5. din \_\_\_\_\_
6. pang \_\_\_\_\_
7. annular \_\_\_\_\_
8. escapade \_\_\_\_\_

**Exercise 80-3: Fill-in-the-blanks** Use the best word from the word list to complete the sentences from the novel (22 Marks)

1. Our unnamed previous horses had been \_\_\_\_\_, so it was not as if we did not need these new ones...
2. Whenever he is engaged to speak his manner is \_\_\_\_\_ and uninviting.
3. In honor of the poor Commodore, I sang a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ ballad: 'His tears behind a veil of flowers, the news came from town'
4. You will often see this scenario in \_\_\_\_\_ adventure novels: Two grisly riders telling their bawdy stories and singing harrowing songs of death and lace.
5. Also, I had encouraged a name change, from The Periwinkle, which I thought bespoke \_\_\_\_\_, to the Queen Bee.
6. As he stood in the doorway to face me his expression was \_\_\_\_\_ and straight and I thought, there is not the slightest bit of fight left in him.
7. I suppose I had wanted him to see me and \_\_\_\_\_ that he had not shown me the proper respect, but there was no time for that.
8. Here was a man whose influence could be found in every corner of the country, and he say drunk in a copper bathtub, his body hairless, his chest scooped and bony, and an over-long ash dangling \_\_\_\_\_ from his cigar.
9. It made me ill to hear him quote the \_\_\_\_\_ so lovingly.
10. Here was my decision, and one that I am happy to say I eventually realized, one that I thoroughly relished and basked in: Twelve months of resting and thinking and becoming \_\_\_\_\_ and serene.
11. I began then, and so did Charlie start to struggle and \_\_\_\_\_ the whores, but it seemed the more we fought the stronger they became.
12. We were to find and kill a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ in California named Hermann Kermit Warm.



*Patrick DeWitt's latest award for The Sisters Brothers is the 2012 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour!*

13. But I doubt I would have been able to \_\_\_\_\_ with such a detachment if there was not the pile of gold waiting for us under the stove in Mayfield.
14. I put Warm into the ground in the morning, with no help from Charlie, though he was once again \_\_\_\_\_ present for the burial itself.
15. He was a sturdy animal, and despite a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ of guilt I put my saddle on him and rode him up and down the river shallows.
16. Each job is different. Some I have seen as singular \_\_\_\_\_. Others have been like a hell.
17. Charlie has an unintelligent-sounding laugh. It is \_\_\_\_\_ is what it is.
18. I did not know what to say in response but the brandy implored me to \_\_\_\_\_ on, and I was opening my jaws to do just this when some deep reasoning took hold of my mouth, maintaining my silence.
19. We took a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ course around Warm and Morris' camp, crossing the river a half mile up and doubling back.
20. Mayfield and Charlie were \_\_\_\_\_ involved in a conversation, but really they were speaking to themselves and wished only to hear their own words and voices.

21. They fell to putting on their playful shows for us, re-creating themselves as curious, \_\_\_\_\_, loving, lusty. One of them thought it prudent to speak like a baby

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22. Of course the moment it passed I became fond of it in a sorrowful kind of way, at least in theory or \_\_\_\_\_ memory.

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**Exercise 80-4: Panning for Anagrams**

*Unscramble the phrases below to create a list word. (6 Marks)*

1. Lift Ivory \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Faint Poetic \_\_\_\_\_

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3. A Mold Time \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Lazier Dies \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Purely Soil \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Big Yarn \_\_\_\_\_

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**Exercise 80-5: Creative Writing – The Picaresque Novel**

A picaresque novel as an “early form of novel, usually a first-person narrative, relating the adventures of a rogue or low-born adventurer as he drifts from place to place and from one social milieu to another in his effort to survive.” (Encyclopedia Britannica) The word picaresque derives from the Spanish word for rogue/rascal, *picaresca*.

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Some other picaresque novels include:

- Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra’s *Don Quixote*
- P.G. Walsh’s *The Satyricon*
- John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*

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Try creating your own picaresque scene with a lovable rogue at its centre. You’ve just committed a crime, yet your goal is to maintain your reader’s sympathies for your main character. Start your scene here!

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Unit by Kelsey Swanson, June 2012